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Animal Industry Report

Animal Industry Report

AS 656

ASL R2513

2010

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Shawna L. Weimer
Iowa State University

Anna K. Johnson
Iowa State University

Paula Sunday
Animal Rescue League of Iowa

Tom Colvin
Animal Rescue League of Iowa

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Recommended Citation

Weimer, Shawna L.; Johnson, Anna K.; Sunday, Paula; and Colvin, Tom (2010) "Independent Study 490A: Canine Behavior Evaluations: Can it Predict Canine Aggression and Therefore Improve Subsequent Adoption Rates?," *Animal Industry Report*: AS 656, ASL R2513.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31274/ans_air-180814-949

Available at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ans_air/vol656/iss1/34

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Independent Study 490A: Canine Behavior Evaluations: Can it Predict Canine Aggression and Therefore Improve Subsequent Adoption Rates?

A.S. Leaflet R2513

Shawna L. Weimer, undergraduate student;
Anna K. Johnson, assistant professor,
Department of Animal Science, Iowa State University;
Paula Sunday, dog behavior counselor;
Tom Colvin, executive director,
Animal Rescue League of Iowa

Summary and Implications

Over the last two decades, many animal shelters have employed behavior evaluations on a selection of canines prior to their adoption to (1) more accurately match the canine with the owner / family and (2) to reduce the probability that canines displaying aggression will not be placed up for adoption. Therefore, the objectives of this study was to (1) determine how successful canines were after completing the behavior test with being adopted and (2) if canines were returned to the shelter if reasons given related to an aggressive citation by the new owner. This study was performed at the Animal Rescue League (ARL) of Iowa, located in Ankeny, IA. All canine behavior evaluations were conducted on a weekly basis (Friday afternoons) from the last week of January through the first week of April 2009. A standardized form for all canine behavior evaluations was used. The canine adoption information was collected on three separate occasions; April 1st, 22nd and 29th 2009. The program used to find adoption information was PetPoint. A total of 41 canines were observed. Thirty-three canines were successfully adopted (87 %) and five were adopted but returned (13 %). Of these five canines returned, only one (20%) reason noted “*aggression towards cat.*” In conclusion, the majority of canines that underwent and passed the behavior evaluation were successful in their adoption. Furthermore, of the five canines returned after being placed for adoption, only one was linked to some form of aggression.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, many animal shelters have employed behavior evaluations on a selection of canines prior to their adoption to (1) more accurately match the canine with the owner / family and (2) to reduce the probability that canines displaying aggressive tendencies will not be placed up for adoption. Canine aggression can be broadly classified into three categories; (1) canine to canine, (2) canine to another animal and / or (3) canine to human. Duffy et al., (2008) reported that the highest rates of canine to human directed aggression were found in smaller breeds

(Dachshund, 26.5 % and Chihuahua, 21.5 %). Duffy et al., (2008) also reported that canine to human aggression can also occur when an object that the canine is motivated to have or possess is taken away. Christensen et al., (2006) reported that a significant number of canines with aggression have the potential for escaping the notice of shelter workers even when employing a standardized behavior evaluation, with 34.8 % of canines showing aggressive tendencies after adoption. Therefore, the objectives of this study was to (1) determine how successful canines were after completing the behavioral test with being adopted and (2) if canines were returned to the shelter if reasons given related to an aggressive citation by the new owner.

Materials and Methods

Location and personnel: This study was performed at the Animal Rescue League (ARL) of Iowa, located in Ankeny, IA. A total of 41 canines were observed. All behavior evaluations were conducted by one fully trained canine behavior specialist (Paula Sunday) and two trained animal handlers, who each had 10+ yr of canine field experience.

Facilities: All canines were kept in their individual kennels and were fed two times a day (0700 and 1700 h) a nutritionally balanced canine diet and had *ad libitum* access to water. If canines showed interest, canine approved toys were provided. All canines were evaluated by the veterinarian upon arrival, and were checked for conformational irregularities, diseases (i.e. heart worm and distemper) and if required were treated. The time for a canine to be brought in and behaviorally evaluated ranged from 0 to 30 d depending on health issues and the severity of the behavior issue.

Behavior evaluation procedure: Canines were collected by one experienced canine handler from their kennel and each canine had a leather leash placed around their neck. Each canine was walked by the trained handler to the training center room. This room measured 15 m length x 15 m width. All windows had blinds lowered so that the canines could not be distracted by other personnel or animals whilst undergoing the behavior evaluation. In addition, there was no traffic in / out of the room other than to perform the behavior evaluation. The handler walked the canine into the room and sat on a chair which was 5 m from the canine behavior specialist. The canine was kept on the leash throughout the entire test. The ARL of Iowa completed a standardized form for all canine behavior evaluations (Table 1).

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Table 1. Standardized behavior evaluation.

Category	Description
Pet	How does the canine react to being touched on the head?
Hug	How does the canine react to being hugged?
Foot	How does the canine react to having its feet picked up and held?
Teeth	How does the canine react to its lips being pulled up to examine teeth?
Stuffed Canine	How does the canine react to another canine?
Doll	How does the canine react to a small child?
Rawhide	How does the canine react to a rawhide being given and taken away?
Pig Ear	How does the canine react to a pig ear being given and taken away?
Food Dish	How does the canine react to being given food in a dish and a hand in the dish during eating?

Options for a canine undergoing behavior evaluation:

After a canine completed the behavior evaluation the canine was placed into one of four categories. Option One: *Adoption*, Option Two: *Euthanized*, Option Three: *Rescue / Foster / Prison Program* / or Option Four: *Search and Rescue*.

Data collection: All behavior evaluations were conducted on a weekly basis (Friday afternoons) from the last week of January through the first week of April 2009 (Table 2).

Table 2. Data to accompany the behavior evaluation.

Information	Description
Date of Test	Date performed
Room Conducted	Training center
Weather Outside	Temperature and condition of weather outdoors
Breed	Breed or estimate of multiple breeds in canine's bloodline
Color	Colors included in coat
Sex	Male or female
Age	Age or estimate of age of canine
Background	Stray or owner relinquishment?
Comments	Additional notes
Intake Date	ARL arrival date
Name	Original or name given
Ticket Number	PetPoint national database

The canine adoption information was collected on three separate occasions; April 1st, 22nd and 29th 2009. The program used to find adoption information was PetPoint, a database used by animal shelters nation wide. Adoption sheets filled out by the new canine owners were then reviewed to establish new home demographics. Data collected from the adoption sheets is located in Table 3.

Table 3. Adoption information.

Adoption Information	Description
Adoption Date	Date adopted
Family Demographics	Number of family members and children
Primary Owner	Male or female?
Living Arrangements	Type of housing, rent or own?
Owned Before	Has the family owned a pet before?
Other Animals	Are there other animals currently in the home?
Brought Back	Was the canine returned? Why?

Inclusion of data: Canines that did not pass the behavior evaluation and were euthanized (n = 2), canines euthanized due to health related issues (n = 3), a canine reclaimed from stray (n = 1) or canines still up for adoption when the study ended (n = 2) were not included in the final data set. All results will be descriptively presented.

Results and Discussion

A total of 33 canines were observed and were either successfully adopted (n = 28; 85%; Table 4) or adopted and returned (n = 5; 15%). The 33 canines were either considered an owner release (n = 24; 73%) or stray (n = 9; 27%).

Table 4. Numbers per breed type of canines that passed the behavior test and were successfully adopted.

Breed Type	No.	Breed Type	No
Beagle Mix	1	Labrador Retriever Mix	7
Border Collie	2	Miniature Dotson	1
Bull Mastiff Mix	1	Miniature Pinscher	1
Cocker Spaniel Mix	3	Miniature Schnauzer	2
Coon Hound	1	Pomeranian	1
Doberman Mix	1	Rottweiler Mix	1
German Shepherd	1	Shish Tzu	2
Husky	1	Terrier Mix	6
Irish Setter	1	.	

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For the five canines that were adopted but returned four (80%) were neutered males, and with varying percentages of their coat color being black (estimated 60 % of their coats was black; Table 5).

Table 5. Canine characteristics for those passing the behavioral test, adopted but brought back.

Breed Type	Coat Color	Sex*	Age
German Shepherd	Black & tan	M	1 yr
Doberman Mix	Black & tan	M	9 mo
Husky	Black & white	F	2 yr
Labrador Retriever	Yellow	M	3 yr
Labrador Retriever	Black	M	3 yr

*M = Male, F = Female

Different reasons were provided for the canine being returned; did not like grandchildren (n = 1), allergies to the canine (n = 1), aggression to cats (n = 1) and too big (n = 2). Therefore in conclusion the majority of canines that underwent and passed the behavioral evaluation were successful in their adoption. Furthermore, of the five canines returned after being placed for adoption, only one was linked to some form of aggression.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the canines, Robin Abeltins, and Suzanne Tomlinson, and all the staff of the Animal Rescue League of Iowa.